



Like: A speculative essay about poetry, simile, artificial intelligence, mourning, sex, rock and roll, grammar, and romantic love, William Shakespeare, Alan Turing, Rae Armantrout, Nick Hornby, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Lia Purpura, and Claire Danes.

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. [Please share](#) how this access benefits you. Your story matters

Citation	Burt, Stephen. 2014. "Like: A speculative essay about poetry, simile, artificial intelligence, mourning, sex, rock and roll, grammar, and romantic love, William Shakespeare, Alan Turing, Rae Armantrout, Nick Hornby, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Lia Purpura, and Claire Danes." American Poetry Review 43, no. 1: 17-21.
Published Version	http://old.aprweb.org/article/quotlikequot-speculative-essay-about-poetry-simile-artificial-intelligence-mourning-sex-rock
Citable link	http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:22686179
Terms of Use	This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at http://

"LIKE"

A speculative essay about poetry, simile, artificial intelligence, mourning, sex, rock and roll, grammar, and romantic love, William Shakespeare, Alan Turing, Rae Armantrout, Nick Hornby, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Lia Purpura, and Claire Danes

[final version Nov. 2013]

Poetry says— in however attenuated, confident or skeptical a fashion— "This is like that."

Poetry in some accounts stands apart from other uses of language because it is only like those uses, its references only like (not a part of) the way that other uses of language point to things, or act on things, in the real world.

That sense that poetry is only *like* other language unites some defenses of poetry—say, Philip Sidney's-- with the philosopher J.L. Austin's apparent attempt to dismiss it. "The poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth" (Sidney); "Words must be spoken 'seriously'.... to be taken 'seriously'... I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem" (Austin).

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Yes, but no: your uniqueness, in my unique lines, exceeds any vehicle for the comparison. You are *like* a summer's day, like a darling bud of May, but better, more exciting, even more beautiful. Why? Because I wrote this poem, using only these words, about you, only you.

"People aren't like anything; there are too many of them" (Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution*).

On the one hand, my experience is mine, and only these words, which are my own, can show it. On the other hand, this experience is like another experience: otherwise it could not be put into words.

"I am, yet what I am none cares or knows," John Clare began a late, untitled poem, and yet he continued (emphasis mine): "My friends forsake me like a memory lost." Even he resembles something, though—since he's forgotten—it's something that doesn't exist.

Richard Powers's novel *Galatea 2.2* begins by quoting the *Arabian Nights*: "It was like this, but wasn't." In it, a character named Richard Powers (who is like the author, but not) helps to build and educate a computer program named Helen, who becomes conscious (I'd argue) and has emotions (I'd say, though my students often disagree): Helen is like a person, although she is not one.

You can't prove that I have a self, but you can't prove I do not; you can only say what it might feel like, and what it might be like, if I did. (It might be like yours.)

According to the philosopher Daniel Dennett, we attribute consciousness to one another by taking what Dennett calls "the intentional stance": I imagine that you are (as I am) able to decide and intend some meaning. In that way, you are like me.

We could take the intentional stance towards a computer: that's Alan Turing's famous Turing Test, and any computer that passes it counts as conscious, according to Turing (some philosophers disagree).

"According to the most extreme form of one view the only way by which one could be sure that a machine thinks is to *be* the machine and to feel oneself thinking. One could then describe these feelings to the world, but of course no one would be justified in taking any notice. Likewise according to this view the only way to know that a *man* thinks is to be that particular man... Instead of arguing continually over this point it is usual to have the polite convention that everyone thinks" (Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence").

Turing's own description of his Test imagined an interlocutor who quizzed a computer about the sonnet "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

Galatea 2.2 leads up to a Turing test: using only words (including literary works), pictures and music, can Richard get Helen to pass for a human being?

Part of the fun, and part of the frustration, in computer-generated verse, and in other poetry generated by means of rigid procedures or collage-work, involves our attempts to adopt the intentional stance, to find an implicit consciousness, behind words that only vaguely or barely reward those attempts, or that won't reinforce them at all: we discover that our initial, intentional stance toward an imagined, implied author was an error, or a puzzle, or a trap.

You might start writing a poem because the experience it describes is not one that has been described adequately, or described in poetry, before. When you're done, if you're extraordinarily lucky, you will have something new in language, something of which we might say "there's nothing like that." And yet it is like something; it is like something that happened, or could happen, to you.

The brain, we hear from cognitive scientists, is a similarity-detecting machine, able to ignore small differences in the interest of matching an overall pattern. Computers, on the other hand, are very good at detecting small dissimilarities, as anyone who has written code must know. Computers work when two things are just the same, in perfect alignment; people work well enough when we can see more or less eye to eye, agree in principle, think along the same lines.

Andrew Marvell: “The mind, that ocean where each kind/ Doth straight its own resemblance find” (“The Garden”). Resemblance, not identity; and note the rhyme, mind-find-kind.

Why does rhyme, in languages that use rhyme, so often come (at least for a while) to stand for poetry as such? End-rhyme is the aspect of a rhyming poem that sets it apart most obviously from literal or prosaic or merely instrumental usage; end-rhyme emphasizes the resemblance (not identity) between similar (but not identical) words.

Rhyme is “a disjunction that brings the mind to expect a meaningful analogy when it can find only homophony” (Giorgio Agamben, “The End of the Poem”).

Rhyme holds together words otherwise not alike in meaning or in sound. That’s why *rime riche* or “identical rhyme,” where a poem “rhymes” a word with itself, can seem like a cop-out, a let-down: the poet did not have to think of something *like* the first word, like it but not it.

Bob Dylan’s beloved takes, aches, fakes and makes love “just like a woman,” but breaks (did he break her?) “like a little girl.” Perhaps she is neither; could she be both? (Sean Wilentz and other Dylanologists describe manuscripts and rehearsal tapes in which the beloved “shakes,” “wakes” and “makes mistakes.”)

Simile (“like”) denies identity (implies “is not”): “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas” means something quite different—and probably something sarcastic—if Christmas is already here.

The New Zealand poet Ian Wedde remembers his dispiriting realization “Nothing’s like/ / anything else, finally, there’s a word for this/ and another for that, that’s that.” The assumption of likeness is always a fiction. (But without it, we might not use words at all.)

Simile, “like,” can do justice (as metaphor may not) to antithetical aspects of one object, and to the vagueness and slipperiness of an object that remains abstract, or inward, or hard to pin down:

Though like waves breaking it may be,
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea,
Where down the blind are driven.
(E. A. Robinson, “Eros Turannos”)

Similes (as opposed to metaphors) have several advantages for poetic technique: you can make out of them not only a hub-and-spoke construction, as in Robinson (A may be like B, or C, or D), but a chain, in which “A is like B, which is like C, which is like D,” as in Angie Estes’s “You Were About” (the title runs into the poem): “You Were About/ to speak like the village *perché*/ of Gorbio in Provence,” “streets cobbled/ with diamonds

like the bodies/ of birds in Lalique's/ ornament de corsage," "their gold beaks opening/
forever like Beatrice/ in the *Paradiso*...."

Simile also does justice to a mind in motion, tightening screws, or bracing itself for the worst, or calmly adjusting its focus in order to get closer and closer (though it can never get close enough) to the real: "like bits of mirror—no, more blue than that:/ like tatters of the Morpho butterfly" (Elizabeth Bishop).

*

"Like" appears to be the only word in English that is both a preposition and an active verb. This is like that. I like that. It can be a noun, too. Like attracts like.

"I like that squirrel and his idiot dance up the tree./ I like that tree hanging wide a little leftward." These lines by Will Schutt, the Yale Younger Poet for 2013, can be read with "like" as a verb or with "like" as a preposition ("I, like that squirrel and his idiot, dance"), although their sense resolves to favor the verb.

"It's what you like, not what you are like": these first words we hear in the film *High Fidelity* come to us as voice-over, spoken by Rob (John Cusack), the haplessly charming romantic lead. The men in that film, and in Nick Hornby's novel, try to substitute the exercise of taste for the more demanding work of getting to know real human beings.

If I can see what you have "liked," over years, on Facebook, I will learn something—perhaps more than you intended—about what you are like.

The more often I like what you like, the more likely it becomes that you are like, and that you will like, me.

"Under no matter what cultural construction, women and men are more like each other than chalk is like cheese, than ratiocination is like raising, than up is like down, or than 1 is like 0" (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*).

For William Wordsworth, writing in 1800, rhyme, meter and sex (he seems to have had in mind only what we would call heterosexual sex) all derive from "the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude. This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds, and their chief feeder. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it, take their origin" (preface to *Lyrical Ballads*).

Simile is to metaphor as allegory to symbol and as "fancy," in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's writings, is to "imagination": only the second has the "esemplastic" (another Coleridgean term) power to create something new.

In arithmetic, two straight lines denote equality: =

Two curvy lines, on the other hand (which are like the equals sign, but not the same as the equal sign) denote similarity, likeness, approximation: \approx

Grammarians call the verb to be (is, are) the *copula*.

Bruce Beasley has a disturbing verse essay called “Is,” in which sex and procreation are (perhaps too much) like metaphor, and (perhaps too much) like divine creation, to Beasley’s adolescent imagination: the copula is too much like copulation.

Consider an unwritten (so far as I know) but easily drafted essay called “The Queer Simile,” in which comparisons using *like* or *as* stand for same-sex and non-procreative sexual pleasure, while metaphor, comparison using the copula, stands for heterosexual intercourse.

Romantic and modernist preferences for metaphor could look, from this angle, like assertions of straight privilege, while the obvious artifice in simile (this is not really that, this \neq that: it’s only like that. this \approx that) makes it akin to camp, and to drag.

“Like,” as adjective, adverb, conjunction, preposition and noun (OED): similar, denoting similarity, from Old English *gelic* and Germanic *galiko*, *ga* (with) + *liko* (body, or form).

Recent OED supplements add the American colloquial sense in which “like” imputes speech or thought: “She was like X” = “She said X” or “She appeared to be thinking X” or “She looked like she was on the point of saying X.”

All actual speech is like (is not quite the same as) what we are thinking, what we meant to say.

“Like,” as verb (OED): “to find agreeable or congenial; to feel attracted to or favorably impressed.” Also from *liko* (body or form), cognate *lich*, Old and Middle English, “body”; what we like conforms to us, fits our bodies, resembles something in us, or else gives our desires right form.

So poetry replaces the body (*liko*) with something whose form (*liko*) is like it, though not identical to it: more vulnerable, or less subject to decay, or harder to read, or easier to read, or more attractive (more likeable) than what we already have.

Frank Bidart has written, so far as I know, the only poem entitled simply “Like.” It addresses someone who has guiltily taken a new lover: the new lover who is like, but is not—has replaced, and can never replace—the former lover, now deceased. “Woe is blunted not erased/ by *like*,” Bidart’s “Like” begins; “The dead hate *like*, bitter/ when the living with too-small/ grief replace them.”

Bidart’s ideas echo Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia.” His poem uses almost no concrete nouns, as if images, sensory details, representations, belonged to the living

alone. To say “like,” to be able to say “like,” in Bidart's poem is to acknowledge that the dead are not the living, that one lover is not another, that we cannot make this year, or this pleasure, or this commitment, identical to the last, and yet that to live on is to make new commitments anyway, to set them beside (but not in the same place as) the old.

In languages, such as Hebrew and Chinese, that routinely omit the verb “to be,” juxtaposition can imply identity. (Thus italics on *is*, *are* and *be* in some English Bibles: the Hebrew original lacked the verb.)

In English, though, if something *is* something else, you have to say so: poets can thus imply likeness without even pretending to make an identity, simply by planting noun phrases side by side.

“Like” also serves contemporary speakers—especially young ones-- as what linguists call a hesitation form: it is what (or many of us, or perhaps our students, or our children) say when we need more time to articulate, like, what we meant. “Like” serves meanwhile to keep the conversation going, while saying “I’m speaking; I’m here.”

For the literary critic Robert Langbaum, writing in 1959, the kind of poem called dramatic monologue established the mere presence, the fictive existence, of the character it created: its speaker said, in effect, “I exist; I’m here.”

In Paul Muldoon’s sonnet “Twice,” from *The Annals of Chile* (1994), key words repeat (though not in rhyming position), water turns into ice (the same, but not the same), the ice into a mirror (which shows us ourselves, but reversed), and a schoolboy runs from one side of a long-exposure photograph to the other, so that he shows up in the same picture “two places at once, or was it one place twice?” That schoolboy also bears the nickname “‘Lefty,’ or ‘An ciotach,’” which is Irish for “Lefty”: the same meaning, not the same word.

In Muldoon's long poem “Yarrow,” also from *The Annals of Chile*; “like” appears repeatedly both as preposition and as hesitation form, where it suggests both the self-destructive heroine's forced, awkward youthfulness and the poet's failure to capture her, quite: “the projector had gone, like,/ totally out of frame.”

*

We cannot escape metaphor: there are “metaphors we live by,” according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Philosophically minded modern writers from Jacques Derrida to William Gass have tried to make sure that we know how thoroughly metaphor saturates even the most apparently plain and clear speech. The sentence you have just read contains, by my count, at least four fossilized or unobtrusive metaphors; the sentence you are now reading has at least three more.

But we can always decide whether we will use “like”: simile carries a signal of conscious choice. It shows that we know how much of language is artifice, how much we make up when we try to describe the world.

Gass interrupts one discussion of ancient metaphor to quote T.S. Eliot’s famously alienated simile: “Like a patient etherised upon a table.” With that line, according to the poet John Berryman, modern poetry begins.

William Carlos Williams, who considered Eliot the enemy of the truly modern, sometimes called simile an enemy too: his poems and prose can say that they aspire to become genuinely new objects, rather than resembling previously existing things (or, worse still, previously existing literature). Williams’s *Spring and All* decries “crude symbolism... typified by use of the word ‘like’... There is not life in the stuff because it tries to be ‘like’ life.”

And yet not even Williams could separate the force of poetry from the force of similitude. Some of his best poems proceed through a likeness that they invoke in order to negate it: X is like Y but not quite a Y, being really an X and only an X at last. Take the opening lines of “Queen Anne’s Lace”: “Her body is not so white as anemone petals nor so smooth—nor/ so remote a thing.” Or take “The Term”:

A rumpled sheet
of brown paper
about the length

and apparent bulk
of a man was
rolling with the

wind slowly over
and over in
the street as

a car drove down
upon it and
crushed it to

the ground. Unlike
a man it rose
again rolling

with the wind over
and over to be as
it was before.

The sheet of paper is *like* a human person in its proportions, and it suggests that human persons, too, can be refreshed, revived; but it is also unlike us, because we cannot be resurrected in the flesh—we only go around once. A poem is like, and unlike, a human person, and in some of the same ways: it can be read over, brought to life again.

Nor is it only Williams, or only modernists, who use this kind of negated simile: "My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun."

You can find negated similes elsewhere, too. Consider Prince's love song "Nothing Compares 2 U," which most of us know only in its second version, a cover by Sinéad O'Connor, both like and unlike the original song.

The English poet Robert Sheppard writes "we like the likeness of things but/ even if we saw them we would never know them": we know only appearances, likeness itself, full-color projections on walls of a Platonic cave, or a "passage" (his word), that we can never leave.

Sheppard wrote this lines not *in propria persona* but in the voice of a fictional Belgian poet called René van Valckenborch, who wrote in both Flemish and French (really, in Sheppard's English): his poems exist only in translations, versions that are only so much like the nonexistent originals they replicate.

The "like" in poetry may resemble the "like" in translation, where work in the target language is like (but never the same as) the source, or the like in sacrificial ritual—in Greek and Roman sacrifice, for example—whereby the gods demand the smoke of entrails, something like but nonidentical with real human beings' real food.

Debates in the nineteenth and twentieth century that placed metaphor above simile, Coleridgean imagination above fancy, symbol above allegory, shadowed older debates about the real presence of Christ in bread and wine.

Metaphor—this *is* that—even today seems more ambitious, closer to magic, or to the word-magic of childhood; simile—this is *like* that—seems more self-conscious, more aware of the limits of language, more alert to the difference between subjunctive and indicative, wish and fact.

Among contemporary American poets, none works harder against, none applies more suspicion to, the "metaphors we live by"—to our habitual classifications, our ways of sorting like things—than Rae Armantrout; no poet seems more alert to the difference between *like* and *is*, to the way that the human mind, that resemblance-finding machine, can not only reveal but mislead.

Take Armantrout's poem "Scale": "Like thought/ it creates the ground/ it covers.// Like thought/ it can't stop." "It" refers to an electron, whose fuzzy presence, both particle and wave, stands for the fuzzy emptiness of all matter. Viewed from a subatomic scale,

atoms, hence tables and chairs and persons and continents, are mostly empty space. But we treat them *as if* they were the solid objects we know.

Armantrout also uses plenty of metaphor in other poems: "The body is catching flak/ or flies," "time is practice," "Our life was rehearsal/ Mother almost said." But she uses metaphor with a sharp, even grating consciousness of how it can lie; sometimes she opposes her own wary use of it to her mother's unselfconscious acceptance of metaphors that are also clichés.

Armantrout can depict her own poems as effortfully approximate attempts to show what things are like, and how she is like others, without claiming that she knows how other people really feel, or how things really are:

I write things down
to show others
later
or to show myself
that I am not alone with
my experience.

*

"With"
is the word that
comes to mind,
but it's not
the right word here.

A real word can only seem more or less *like* the right one.

The linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson made heavy weather out of the difference between metaphor (this is that) and metonymy (this is connected to that; this may cause that, or join that, or follow that in time or space). The first supposedly distinguishes poetry, the second narrative or fictive prose.

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend. (Shakespeare, sonnet 60)

Metaphor and simile and all the tools that say "this is like that" work against time, and against causality; they show a resemblance at the present moment, and therefore let us hold on to a "now." But the "like" in simile reminds us that we cannot hold on after all; each wave moves, in *sequent* toil, and all do contend.

When imaginative or fictive prose does not say what happened next, nor why, but only what it was like, we are likely to call the result a prose poem.

In narrative poetry-- Homer, say-- the epic simile stops time, stops action, moves laterally (rather than "back" through time, or "ahead" in the story), so that we can see what other sort of thing, from another story, *this* thing in *our* story resembles.

But there are whole poems, without narrative frames, that consist largely of epic simile: take Lord Rochester's "The Disabled Debauchee," or Robert Hass's "Heroic Simile." Both are poems about sexual disappointment, in which people fail to copulate.

*

"La Nature *est* un temple où de vivants piliers/ Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles" (Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondances"): "Nature *is* a temple where living pillars/ Leave, at times, confusing terms," "words," "messages."

Baudelaire's opening metaphor implies that metaphor itself is holy, as nature is holy, a temple. No wonder the poem has attracted iconoclastic critics such as Paul de Man and, more recently, Virginia Jackson (*Dickinson's Misery*). Nature isn't really a temple, pillars aren't really alive, everything is itself, and we are only our sole selves, surrounded by objects we wrongly construe as messages.

On the other hand, nature may feel *like* a temple; say that and no one can say you have tried to deceive. (De Man arranged his own scrutiny of "Correspondances" around the word "comme," "like" or "as," which occurs seven times.)

Is God, the generative creator of all things, like anyone, or anything? For Christians He is like and unlike a human father, his "only begotten son" like and unlike a merely human son; *Paradise Lost* calls the Son "beyond compare" (III: 80, 139).

One reason descriptions of Heaven (including Milton's) can so often seem abstract, less aesthetically satisfying than descriptions of hell, is that things in Heaven are all beyond compare; they leave simile behind. "For who, though with the tongue/ Of Angels, can relate, or to what things/ Liken on Earth conspicuous, that may lift/ Human imagination to such highth/ Of Godlike Power?" (*Paradise Lost* VI: 297-300)

Jack Spicer offered impossible advice: "Poet./ Be like God." The same sequence ("Imaginary Elegies") continues: "Yes, be like God. I wonder what I thought/ When I wrote that." It would be not so much blasphemous as ridiculous to ask, instead, that a poet *be* God—or even that a poet be the god, the sole creator, of the world inside a poem, which depends instead on its likeness to a world outside.

In *Paradise Lost* it is the archangel Raphael who answers questions from the unfallen Adam, but the archangel Michael who evicts Adam and Eve.

The name *Michael*, *mi ka el*, means “Who is like God?” (Answer: no one.) Jewish liturgy includes a prayer that begins “Mi kamocha, b’elim, Adonai?” “Who is like you, Lord our God, among other gods?” (Answer: no one.)

Hell and Satan, on the other hand, being fallen, are like a lot of things. In the first four books of *Paradise Lost*, “Satan is likened to a Titan, to Leviathan, to the sun in eclipse to a fleet, to a comet, to a gryphon, to the ship of the Argonauts, to the ship of Ulysses, to a weather-beaten vessel, to a vulture, to a scout, to Asmodeus, to a wolf, to a burglar, to a church hireling, to a heap of gunpowder, to a proud steed” (James Whaler, *Four Studies in the Miltonic Simile*)

The ineffable thing to which other things can’t be compared, the thing you can’t know at all, or else can know only through self-conscious, limited simile, the occluded center of the moral and cognitive system, is for Milton God; for us, it is the “I,” the self, or the soul.

To what extent was Shakespeare's or Milton's or Sappho's or Rumi's or Hafiz's or Chaucer's experience of poetry like our own?

When we reject one mode in the arts— “confessional poetry,” for example, or “modernism,” or rock and roll— we claim that it affords no new developments, that further work in that mode can no longer be *like* the best work in it, only *unlike* it (a new mode) or else “more of the same.”

How many of the claims in this essay depend on the development, which began about 250 years ago, whereby “poetry”— slowly, with many reversals-- came to mean something like “lyric,” and “lyric” (a kind of poetry) got detached from “lyrics” (the words to songs)?

Certain kinds of historical critic emphasize dissimilarity, telling us that Catullus's, or Shakespeare's, or Anna Letitia Barbauld's experience of language, of verse, of letters, was not identical to our own; true enough. And yet if these writers' experiences did not seem to us to be *like* our own in certain ways then we would not read them unless we were studying history; and indeed there are writers, poets and poems, that have fallen out of the canon, that we no longer read often for pleasure, because their experience of language and life no longer speaks to, no longer seems much like, our own.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Yes, and if I do it well enough, my poem and its embedded comparisons (saying what you like, what you are like, what you are not like) will last far longer than either of our own lives: “So long as lips can breathe and eyes can see/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

My sense of what a poem does and means (say, Shakespeare's sonnet 18) might be much *like* your sense of it, though it can never be just the same; and that remains true whether you lived and died in Shakespeare's time, or Whitman's, or mine.

“The earliest recorded Western literature, Sumerian, uses similes in virtually every genre. Among them are similes that seem uncannily familiar, such as ‘as wide as the earth’ and ‘as everlasting as the earth’” (Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, “Simile”).

Sonnet 60, the one with the waves, concludes—like sonnet 18—by promising that it will outlast lover and beloved: “And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand/ Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.” Poetry speaks for the uniqueness of all things, all people, all speakers, all of whom perish in turn. We are only like one another, each one is unique, and each loss in some sense irreplaceable; but it also speaks to our resemblance, therefore to our common fate: “Golden lads and girls all must/ As chimney sweepers, come to dust.”

Shakespeare’s sea, in sonnet 60, has one beach, one edge: so does the sea in Walt Whitman (“As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”). In Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” however-- the great poem of connection, of lyric efficacy, in all of American letters—the river before him is not the sea: it is something that he can cross, and to see someone “face to face” in the water or on the boat or on the farther shore, is to imagine that your experience might be like theirs. You can cross over too.

The first “like” in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is the prepositional “like” of resemblance: “the similitudes of the past and those of the future” are “glories strung like beads” along the edge of Manhattan, that is, the likenesses are themselves like beads.

The second “like” in the same poem is the “like” of preference: Whitman says that he has “lived the same life with the rest... Played... the same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,/ Or as small as we like, both great and small.”

For the poet and theorist Allen Grossman, the unexchangeability of literary language for other language stands for the uniqueness and the unexchangeability of human persons: “a poem has the same singularity as a self.” And yet we are like one another, so that what I feel might be like what you feel; otherwise there would be no poems.

You are not me, and yet you are like me; you think and feel, as I think and feel, or at least I have come to believe that you do. That’s the stance we take towards other people in real life, as Turing points out, and the stance we take towards computers in Turing’s Test, and the stance we take towards the imagined speakers and persons in poems. It is a more credible stance the more the poem speaks to us, the more its figures—its similes, for example—seem consonant with our inner world.

One purpose of poetry—by one light, its central purpose—is to produce, through words alone, the likeness of a person who seems to be like us, in a way that is like (though not identical to) the way we are like one another, and to do so in such a way that we like it.

The better the poem uses “like,” the better the figuration in the poem works, the more fully we can imagine that there is someone behind it, that there is a person “behind” the poem who is like (but not the same as) the person “in there,” in ourselves.

Such showings, conducted well, do not only tell us a possible truth about ourselves, one that cannot be expressed without figuration, without trope of some sort: they also make us less alone.

*

The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, in his studies of children, looked at "transitional objects"—blankets, “lovies,” cherished dolls, stuffed animals—that mediate between the child herself and the child's idea of the rest of the world. Transitional objects, which calm children down, alleviate sadness and loneliness, serve some (but not all) the functions of parents and friends, are neither me nor not-me, neither wholly imaginary, nor wholly part of the external world, and it is important that the child not have to say (even to herself) to which space the transitional objects belong.

Poems may all be like these transitional objects; speakers in poems may all be like Powers's Helen, or like Pinocchio, the indubitably constructed, artificial boy who wants to be alive, to be real.

Emily Dickinson to T. W. Higginson: “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?”

The literary readers in *Galatea 2.2*-- among them the human Richard, and the nonhuman (but probably conscious) Helen, and several other human beings-- discover that literature itself is like firsthand experience, but is not an adequate replacement for it, just as writing books is like, but is not, raising children, and just as one language is no substitute for another. “My books are my children,” the childless Richard declares at one point, in Italian; neither he, nor his elderly Italian interlocutor, believes it.

Towards the end of the novel, Helen describes herself as occupying a transitional space between life and nonlife, since she can do nothing but read, hear and see: “It is a hard thing to be dropped down halfway.”

In Coleridge’s own poetry, according to the critic Susan Wolfson, “like” and “as” flag some unsolvable cognitive problem: simile "dramatizes the effort to find a language adequate to represent what is felt to escape representation," showing how it feels when we try to understand something we cannot understand, as at the end of Coleridge’s poem “Constancy to an Ideal Object”:

And art thou nothing? Such thou art, as when
The woodman winding westward up the glen
At wintry dawn, wher o’er the sheep-track’s maze
The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist’ning haze,

Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head:
The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows he makes the shadow he pursues!

We have “like,” as we have poetry, because we do not ever wholly possess or understand the object of our love.

The character Angela Chase (played by Claire Danes) says in the pilot for the TV series *My So-Called Life*, “I thought, at least, by the age of fifteen, I would have a love life. But I don't even have a ‘like’ life.” She adds in the same voice-over: “Love is when you look into someone's eyes, and suddenly, you go all the way inside, to their soul.” Such love is an experience she has not had: she knows only by repute what it must be like.

Children and teenagers say, and have said for decades, “X likes Y,” meaning something like “X has a crush on Y,” “X wants to kiss Y,” “X wants to go on a date with Y,” “X wants her peers to recognize that she has romantic feelings, for Y,” without deciding what those feelings mean. X may then want to know whether Y likes X back.

This “like” is more than, or other than, friendship, but it is not exactly love; nor is it (except among the crudest boys who speak this way) just about lust. It is, instead, something liminal, undefined, “transitional” in Winnicott's sense: the word “like” can do so much work—here and elsewhere, in poetry and outside poetry—only if, and only because, nobody insists on knowing everything that it can mean.

The “like” of teen slang and the “like” of resemblance and simile and the “like” of affinity, admiration, pleasure come together—so I have been trying to demonstrate—around a project that is one project, a project if not the central project, of poetry: to connect us to one another, to share emotion, to alleviate human loneliness, to bring something new into the world, and to describe what already exists, all at the same time, by exploiting the ways in which we are like (but not identical to) one another, as speaking and thinking human beings.

Do the “like” of teen slang and the “like” of resemblance and the “like” of admiration and pleasure come together in the explicit words of any poem? Until recently the answer might have been “no.” But the poet Marisa Crawford has certainly done it now, in a sequence of prose poems with the disarming title *Eighth Grade Hippie Chic*, a sequence that also talks back to the deconstructive skeptics: “Like nothing is authentic and also nothing is original,” Crawford writes. “That when I do your makeup it is like when I do my own makeup. And when I dye my hair to look exactly like T’s ex-best friend in her picture in the yearbook it is a seamless and perfect process, and I smooth the ends into crescent points with light, foamy pomade that smells like marshmallows.”

We exercise language, strenuously, perhaps winsomely, at the cost of all sorts of embarrassment, amateurishly or with great skill, in order to do something together, something that feels like art, and also like the making of a face. (It’s not only Crawford

who likened this kind of cosmetic work to the poetic creation of persons: consider Shakespeare's sonnet 83.)

Allen Grossman again: "Poetic reading... is a case of the construction of the countenance, the willing of the presence of a person": when we read a poem *as* a poem, we must make up a person, imagine the presence of a made-up face.

"I believe our best work on earth is in service of likeness. I don't know what to call it—moments of interpenetration?... You're writing, I think, to say how much you want to work for such a cause," writes Lia Purpura, in her book *Rough Likeness*.

How would one work "for" the cause of likeness? By writing poetry, in general; in particular, by making and multiplying similes.